The Bottom Line

Empty

Empty

Not even the western Indian state of Goa’s picturesque landscapes can obscure the menace lurking below the surface of a conflicted rural community in "The Man Beyond the Bridge." After winning the FIPRESCI critics' prize at last year's Toronto International Film Festival, writer-director Laxmikant Shetgaonkar's feature debut has been picking up considerable momentum on the fest circuit.

International festivals will continue to welcome this gently affecting tale, while broadcast and DVD sales are distinct possibilities in receptive territories. The drama recently won the narrative jury award at the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles.

Vinayak (Chitranjan Giri), a widowed forest guard, lives a solitary existence in the woods, patrolling an isolated protected area to prevent illegal logging and supervising reforestation activities. Manipulated by a scheming politician, local villagers on the other side of a bridge spanning a nearby river resent Vinayak's interference with their timber poaching, since they consider the forest their ancestral land.

His supervisor's (Deepak Amonkar) refusal to consider a transfer only makes it harder for Vinayak to overcome the lingering grief following his wife's death. When his solitude is disrupted by a homeless woman (Veena Jomkar), who is considered an insane outcast and driven into the forest by villagers, Vinayak takes pity and begins to occasionally offer her meals.

As the unnamed woman, who's in her early 30s and only capable of vocalizing rather than speaking, lingers longer around Vinayak's forest bungalow, he gradually takes her into his home and then his bed, as her frequent agitation begins to abate and his feelings for her grow. (In fact, her behavior appears to stem more from developmental disability than insanity.) His new domestic arrangement does not go unnoticed by the villagers, who begin to gossip and harass the couple. Meanwhile, the politician's initiative to construct a temple encroaches further on the forest as tragic confrontation appears imminent.

Shetgaonkar has crafted a universal story that's all the more powerful for its simplicity. The naturalistic filmmaking and performances evoke the best of Indian independent cinema with a distinctive regional flair. While the technical aspects may be rather modest overall, Shetgaonkar accomplishes some especially graceful sequences covering the expansive exterior settings with elegant tracking and high-angle shots (even getting the production equipment into this remote setting seems a notable achievement).

Venue: Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles
Production company: National Film Development Corporation Limited
Cast: Chitranjan Giri, Veena Jomkar, Prashanti Talpanker, Vasanth Josalkar, Deepak Amonkar
Director-screenwriter: Laxmikant Shetgaonkar
Producer: National Film Development Corporation Limited
Director of photography: Arup Mandal
Music: Veda Nair
Editor: Sankalp Meshram
No rating, 96 minutes